

The First Day of the Rest of Our Lives by jackwabbit

Category: Stranger Things, 2016

Genre: Family, Friendship

Language: English

Characters: Eleven/Jane H., J. Hopper, Joyce B.

Status: Completed

Published: 2017-11-18 23:19:30

Updated: 2017-11-18 23:19:30

Packaged: 2019-12-17 04:55:43

Rating: K+

Chapters: 1

Words: 2,650

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

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Rated: PG

Category: Vignette. Friendship/found family. Entire party.

Time Frame: Within "The Gate" (Season Two) - immediately after the gate scene.

Spoilers: Stranger Things, Season Two.

Summary: Well, the world didn't end. Guess it was time for breakfast.

Hopper and Eleven returned from the lab sometime overnight. No one could've said when.

They were the last to arrive. Still, the house that met them was silent. But every light in the place was on, so the silence was easily explained.

Because despite the brightness, Joyce had finally succumbed to slumber, propped up in a corner of the couch and holding Will tightly to her chest like an infant. He didn't seem to mind, though, because he slept soundly too.

At his feet on the next cushion was Max, semi-upright with her head lolled over the back of the couch. Lucas was next to her, slumped on her shoulder.

Hopper might have thought the scene was cute if he hadn't been so exhausted. And carrying an unconscious Eleven in his arms. As it was, he maneuvered into the house without paying the couch much mind and kicked the door shut as gently as he could. It still made more noise than he would've liked, but it was a testament to their own exhaustion that no one on the couch moved.

The floor, however, was another story.

Mike Wheeler popped his head up from a pile of blankets Hopper hadn't noticed.

"Is she OK?" he blurted, almost breathless and nearly fully awake.

"Hey, keep it down!" shushed Hopper, nodding toward the couch.
"She's fine, kid. Everyone OK here?"

Mike nodded mutely.

Hopper exhaled in relief.

"Thank God," he said. "Now go back to sleep."

"But..." protested Mike.

"No buts," said Hopper in a harsh whisper. "Sleep. Now. You wake El, or any of them, and there will be hell to pay."

Mike's eyes grew wide. Hopper knew he was being harsh, but he didn't care. He just wanted everything to stop. Even if just for the night. He gave Wheeler his best glare. Mike stared back for a long moment before taking a big breath and resettling down on the floor. Just as he seemed to get comfortable, Hopper spoke again.

"Actually," he mused. "I could use your help."

Mike popped up again, this time completely discarding his blankets so that they exposed the curly-haired kid next to him. Dustin rolled over, pulling the covers with him and mumbling something, but he continued to sleep.

Hopper rolled his eyes. Was everyone in this house dead to the world except the one kid he most wanted to avoid?

"Chief?" asked Mike.

Hopper nodded down the hall.

"I presume Nancy bunked with Jonathan?"

Mike blushed and bit his lip, then nodded.

"Will's bed?"

"Steve Harrington."

Hopper sighed. What was this? A bed and breakfast?

"Joyce's?"

Mike nodded. "That should work."

Hopper nodded down the hall again, adjusting an awkward El to relieve his straining muscles before he dropped the kid. Thankfully, Eleven didn't stir.

"Then get the door," he muttered.

Mike rushed to do as he was told, nearly tripping over something in his way. He righted himself quickly, then looked up at Hopper.

"Watch out for Billy," he warned.

"Who the hell is Billy?!" demanded Hopper. Mike opened his mouth to answer, but Hopper cut him off.

"You know what? Never mind. I don't want to know."

As he spoke, Hopper stepped over yet another body on the floor and followed Mike to Joyce's room. The boy pushed the door open and Hopper didn't hesitate to follow him into the room.

He laid Eleven down on the bed and slowly straightened up, groaning as his back popped in protest.

Then he turned on Mike and pointed toward the door.

"Out," he grunted.

Mike looked like he wanted to argue, but Hopper didn't let him.

"Not tonight, kid. Tomorrow," Hopper said quietly. "I promise."

Mike looked angry and distrusting, but he slowly edged to the door and then back to Dustin's side, where he stole back the covers and angrily punched his pillow a few times before finally settling.

Despite all that, he was out like a light a minute later.

After removing both his and Eleven's jackets and shoes, Hopper slept too.

He didn't wake until morning. Not even when Joyce grew restless enough to ease out from under Will to pee and checked for Hop's blazer at the same time. Not even when she peeked into her room to see Hopper curled protectively around Eleven, who was turned into his chest and bunching his shirt in both fists. Not even when she tripped over Billy on her way back to the couch and let out a strangled curse.

No, he didn't wake again until he heard Joyce scream.

Then he was awake in an instant. He disentangled himself from a similarly awake Eleven and tumbled out of bed. A second later, he careened into the kitchen, scanning the room for threats, with El hot on his heels. He reached one arm back to restrain her while he questioned the only other person in the room.

"Joyce!" he thundered. "What is it?"

Joyce gestured wordlessly to the fridge. The door hung partially open and she stared at it in horror.

Before Hopper could see what the problem was, there were four more bodies in the room, and all of them were making noise.

"I told you not to do that."

"We had to."

"You could have told her, at least."

"I forgot!"

"You forgot? How could you forget?"

"Oh, I don't know. What with saving the world and everything."

"El saved the world."

"We helped."

After a moment of pure confusion at the pandemonium that had erupted, Hopper clapped his hands twice and yelled to the room at large.

"Hey! Knock it off!"

The kids paused, but didn't stop. Now, though, they focused their words on him instead of each other. Jim wasn't sure which was worse.

"It was Dustin's idea!"

"I told you! It's for science!"

"Yeah, cuz science has been so helpful with all this!"

Hopper sighed as he ignored them and made his way to Joyce's side. He slowly opened the fridge. Once he could see inside, he just rolled his eyes and shook his head. There wasn't much else he could do. Because these days, discovering a literal monster in the fridge just after sunrise was pretty par for the course. Behind him, where she was still trailing him like a puppy, Eleven giggled.

Hopper looked down at the kid and sighed. Of course she thought this was funny.

Then he looked at Dustin, Mike, Lucas, and Max and issued an order as Will watched groggily from the couch, where he'd stretched out full-length now that he had it to himself.

"Clean this up. Now."

A snorting laugh came from the doorway. Everyone looked up to see Steve Harrington leaning against the wall. "Good luck with that," he murmured, pushing past the kids to grab a glass and then fill it with water from the sink.

Hopper was about to give the punk a piece of his mind and kick those other kids into gear when he actually looked at Harrington.

"What the hell happened to you?" he asked, noting the split lip and bruised face.

Steve opened his mouth to answer, but then snapped it shut when the phone suddenly rang.

Everyone jumped, startled both by the noise and the fact that someone had plugged the phone back in at some point.

It rang again.

And then again. Joyce was about to answer it when Jonathan ambled out from his room and did so.

"Hello?" he slurred.

A moment passed. No one said anything or even moved. If Jonathan noticed everyone was staring at him, he gave no sign of it. Then he spoke again, a little more alert.

"Yeah," he said. "Hold on."

With that, he wordlessly held the phone out toward Hopper. Hopper looked at the kid like he was crazy and pointed at his own chest and mouthed, "it's for me?"

Jonathan nodded, so Hopper stepped over to him and took the phone.

"This is Jim Hopper," he greeted.

Another silence descended, but it was short-lived. Hopper sighed and spoke into the receiver just as Nancy Wheeler wandered onto the scene rubbing a hand through her hair.

"Yeah. OK, Flo. I think we're good. But hold on. Lemme do a roll call."

Hopper looked around the room. He ticked his fingers as he saw Mike, Nancy, Max, Lucas, Dustin, and Steve. Then he motioned to the hall and addressed Steve.

"That's Billy, right?"

Steve nodded, but Hopper didn't miss the narrowing of his eyes as he

did. He'd have to look into that later.

Hopper spoke into the phone again.

"Yeah. They're all here, Flo. Tell their folks they're fine. They'll be home by noon."

Then he hung up and eyeballed every single person in the room who didn't live there.

"You *will* be home by noon."

No one argued.

"Now, clean this mess up and get dressed. We're going out for breakfast."

Everyone looked confused but they still didn't argue. Instead, they started cleaning up the discarded food, Will's drawings, and everything else strewn about the house from the previous night's adventures.

The kids did most of the work, but it was Hopper who manhandled the Hargrove kid into his car and sent him packing once he was finally up and about.

And it was Hopper who threw the demodog into the fire pit out back and lit it, much to Dustin's dismay.

As he watched the damn thing burn, Joyce sidled up next to him.

"Breakfast?" she asked.

Hopper shrugged. "I thought a little bribery might get the job done faster. Besides, I'm starving and those brats made sure there's nothing to eat here."

"Yeah, sure," said Joyce. "Thanks for that. But breakfast? Out?"

She gave Eleven, who was standing on the porch with Mike, a pointed look.

Hopper shrugged again. "At this point, I don't care. I just want a plate of eggs and bacon and some damn coffee."

"Is it safe?"

"Probably not. But I can't lock her up again. Not today. I'm too tired for that battle."

Joyce snorted. "I bet she's a handful."

Jim chuckled. "You have no idea."

It was quiet for a moment, then Joyce spoke again.

"So, where we going?"

Hopper surprised her by replying immediately.

"Waffle House on the edge of town. They've got a new waitress from Indy. Maybe she'll be on shift. She won't know us."

Joyce raised her eyebrows at Hopper.

"A new waitress, huh?" she asked, with a teasing lilt in her voice.

Hopper gave her an annoyed look.

Joyce grinned. "Is she cute?"

His look intensified. "I didn't notice."

"Uh-huh," said Joyce, clearly not believing him one bit.

Hopper sighed. "You're as bad as they are," he said, hooking a thumb toward the house.

Joyce laughed and walked back to the house without another word as the flames died down.

Hopper watched them a bit longer, then banked his disgusting fire and followed her.

Ten minutes later, everyone was crowded near the door, ready to

head out, and it was all Hopper could do not to start shooting people.

"Shotgun!" yelled Lucas.

"I already called it," argued Dustin. "Besides, he was my friend first!"

"I'm riding with Jonathan and Nancy!" proclaimed Will, miraculously seeming nearly his old self.

Mike cut in then. "But I thought we were riding together."

"There's room for both of us," said Will.

"But not for El."

"I can drive," offered Max.

Steve put his foot down. "Not happening, sister."

Max pouted. "But I did before, and..."

Steve cut her off. "Don't care."

Hopper grinned. He thought maybe he was beginning to like this kid. But he'd had enough. He met Eleven's eyes and nodded his head toward the truck. She gave him a small, grateful smile and the tiniest of nods, then slid through the crowd to slip out the front door. Meanwhile, Jim went out the back, grateful that at least for now, El still didn't understand adolescent drama and didn't want much to do with it.

A moment later, they sat in the blissful silence of the Blazer. Hopper started it and cranked up the heat as they waited for the others.

It wasn't long before a trickle of humanity started coming from Joyce's house.

Nancy, Jonathan, Will, and Joyce climbed into Jonathan's beater.

Lucas, Max, Dustin, and Steve got into Steve's BMW. Dustin took shotgun.

And Mike wandered over to the Blazer.

Hopper sighed and motioned the kid in with his head. Mike beamed and Hopper rolled his eyes. He had a feeling he'd be doing a lot of that in the foreseeable future.

Mike climbed in and settled on the back seat, then Hopper put the truck in gear and headed out.

Twenty-five long minutes later, a party of eleven (two adults, three teens, and six adolescents - one of whom was wearing a beat up fedora and sunglasses for some reason) was seated at Waffle House.

They did get the new waitress, and it was a wonder she kept at it after they were through with her. Between changed orders, substitutions, insisting that the weird kid in the hat get one of everything, and the generalized loudness of the pushed-together tables, it was astounding that she even got through her shift.

But she managed. There was only one mistake made.

But Hopper didn't care. Scrambled eggs were fine. He tucked into them just as hungrily as if they were the over-medium he'd ordered.

As he did, Joyce gave him a questioning look from where she sat next to him.

"Scrambled? That's not like you."

Hopper looked puzzled. "How would you know?"

Joyce shrugged. "I notice things," she said, sounding cryptic. "And she *is* cute," she added, nodding toward the waitress and elbowing him lightly in the ribs.

Hopper sent her a mock glare. "Oh, knock it off," he grouched.

Joyce snorted and clearly planned to do nothing of the sort.

Just then, a bottle of syrup went sliding off the end of the table and shattered all over the floor.

Hopper's eyes snapped to Eleven to find her looking right back at him with the universal startled expression of a kid caught in the act. But

her nose wasn't bleeding, so Hopper relaxed as the waitress came over and Dustin jumped to help clean up the mess.

"My fault," he said, giving the waitress an exaggerated smile. "Let me get that for you."

Hopper heard a low groan from the end of the table, where Steve Harrington was just sitting there looking like crap and shaking his head at Dustin's antics.

Jim snorted. He was definitely starting to like that kid.

Hopper shoveled another bite of food into his mouth. He was determined to enjoy this meal no matter what.

As he swallowed it down with a swig of coffee, Joyce sighed.

"What?" he asked.

She made a vague gesture toward the motley crew around the tables.

"Nothing," she mused, surveying the scene, "it's just... I guess this is our life now?"

Hopper's only response was a hearty laugh. A full-bodied belly laugh like she hadn't heard from him in years.

It was all the answer she needed.